

From Poetry to EAP

By Gilda Pimenta

Don't walk in front of me,
 I may not follow.
Don't walk behind me,
 I may not lead.
Walk beside me
 And just be my friend.
 Albert Camus

Looking back at my first experience as a teacher and comparing it with my present attitude, I see considerable change. There is, however, one aspect that has prevailed: my belief that human and affective factors are fundamental to the teaching/learning process. And if this is true for general EFL programs, it is still more relevant for the teaching of ESP/EAP. I would like to be able to motivate science students so that they could take real ownership of English instead of simply using the language as a tool for their present or future careers (suggested by Gardner and Lambert's concept of instrumental motivation).

With this view, it was decided at our faculty that a teacher should be appointed each year to coordinate work in general and establish contacts between students and teachers. Moreover, the teacher in charge of the first year, apart from the above-mentioned duties, is also supposed to become familiar with the profile of each student, passing this information on to other colleagues. I have been responsible for this task for the last three years. This means that when students enter our program, we interview them to obtain information about their expectations, and their individual preferences.

Their answers to the questions about preferences have been used in planning special lessons which differ radically from the usual EAP lessons.

It has always been our belief that motivation is the key word for almost everything in life. It is the first step towards reaching our goals, in overcoming our difficulties and in fulfilling our responsibilities.

We are inclined to say that, as teachers, our very first objective is to help each student identify and develop his/her own motivations. Thus, the interviews were very useful,

because they helped us to plan a different kind of lesson that would be responsive to the students' preferences.

This one in particular was planned for Marco, a 21-year-old student, born in Angola, who stressed his preference for the reading and writing of poetry. For Marco, poetry would be the motivating medium.

Let me describe each step of the lesson planned with Marco in mind:

1. Warm Up Phase: During this first stage of the lesson the main thrust was to empower the learners to express personal feelings and attitudes about poetry. Marco was the first student to be questioned, but soon the whole class engaged in the conversation.

The second move within this phase involved giving the class photographs and short bibliographies of well-known poets.

2. Group Work: Students were asked to get together in three groups and each group was given a different poem to read and comment on. To help students get started, I asked the three groups a few general questions about the poems and then I told the groups to go on asking each other questions in the same way.

Some of the students' questions were written on the board for error correction and to consolidate the structure of Wh- questions.

3. Structural Analysis: From the three poems, an English translation of one by Albert Camus was chosen. It was analyzed in terms of structure, moving the class focus from thematic discussion to linguistic analysis. To achieve this, students were shown a transparency of the poem on the OHP. They were asked to look at the verse and identify verb forms, prepositions and any other structural aspect that might catch their attention. Some students recognized the imperative forms, one referred to the use of the modal "may," and Marco isolated the three prepositions of place. Some of the students were talking in Portuguese and some of the answers were not in very good English, but the fact is that the students themselves did all the work. I use the "consciousness raising strategies," advocated by Rutherford and Smith to get the students to think about structure.

4. Controlled Production Stage: Guided, controlled production involves adding a few lines to the poem after having been given some key words, e.g.:

give orders /ready to accept
give advice /may / hear
sit /beside /forget /the world /be/friend

The students' versions were written on the board for exchanging ideas and correction.

5. *Transfer Activity*: Industrial explosives-their main characteristics, types, handling problems and different uses- comprised one thematic area of our EAP course. For this reason, we thought it might be a good opportunity to use the imperative constructions and prepositions of place in Camus' poem to consolidate the EAP vocabulary of that unit and the grammatical structures of the poem. Two examples were provided to stimulate the class and help them retrieve what they had already studied about that topic, e.g.:

1. Be careful when transporting explosives from one place to another.
2. You must place the charges in the holes carefully. In pairs, students were left to go on writing sentences as in the example.

Transfer activities are, in our opinion, one of the most interesting features of teaching a foreign language. They help students recognize that ESP/EAP is not a world apart, but a kind of interaction that may contribute to the development of other aspects of communication.

6. *Homework*: To finish the lesson the students were asked to write a poem for homework. Looking at their faces, I realized that many were not going to do it, but Marco did; he, himself, acknowledged that he was surprised at having been able to express his ideas in English. The poem had nothing to do with either the themes or the structures discussed during the lesson, but it reflected the strong link that has been created among the student, the teacher, and the language.

Conclusion

To sum up, let me stress six key concepts: *interviews, student profiles, motivation, poetry, transfer activities*, and *creativity*. The *interviews* led to the definition of individual *profiles* which facilitated the task of *motivation*, leading us, this time, towards *poetry*. The structural aspect of the poem analyzed suggested the transfer to one of the ESP/EAP-specific topic areas and provided an opportunity for creativity, perhaps one of the most difficult goals to obtain in the learning process as a whole.

But this goal was achieved in the following lesson when Marco read his poem to the class:

Strange days have found us. Strange days have found our traces. They are going to destroy our casual joys. We must go on planning, Or find a new town

Marco

Gilda Pimenta has taught EAP at the University of Porto for the last 16 years. She is co-editor of three books for the teaching of English.

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